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## **Chad Villages Hit by Echoes of Ethnic War across Border**

By Lydia Polgreen

DJEDIDAH, Chad — The account Halima Sherif gave of her family's ordeal was chillingly familiar in this part of the world. Arab men on horseback rode into her village, shouting racial epithets over the rat-tat-tat of Kalashnikov gunfire.

"They shouted 'zurga,' " she said, an Arabic word for black that carries the connotation of a racial slur. "They told us they would take our land. They shot many people and burned our houses. We all ran away."

Scenes like this one have been unfolding in the war-ravaged Darfur region of western Sudan for more than three years, and since the beginning of this year Sudanese Arabs have also been attacking Chadian villages just across Sudan's porous border.

But the attacks on Djedidah and nine villages around it in early October took place not in Darfur, or even on Chad's violent border with Sudan. It took place relatively deep inside Chad, about 60 miles from the border, a huge distance in a place with few roads, where most travel by horse, donkey or foot.

Beyond that, the attack was carried out not by Sudanese raiders from across the border but by Chadian Arabs, according to victims of the attack.

"They were our neighbors," Ms. Sherif said, as she hurried to collect a few goats from the charred remains of her family compound. "We know them. They are Chadian."

The violence in Darfur has been spilling over into Chad since at least early this year, when cross-border attacks by Sudanese bandits and militias chased more than 50,000 Chadians living in villages along the border from their homes.

But the violence around one of the other interior villages that was attacked, Kou Kou, is different and ominous, aid workers and analysts say. It appears to have been done by Chadian Arabs against non-Arab villages in Chad, and was apparently inspired by similar campaigns of violence by Sudanese Arab militias in Sudan. The villages are inhabited primarily by farmers from the Daju tribe.

"This is not a cross-border conflict — it is a local interethnic conflict," said Musonda Shikinda, head of the United Nations refugee agency's office in the area. "The perpetrators are their neighbors, not people from abroad."

About 3,000 people have fled their homes because of the recent attacks, and about 100 have been killed, according to United Nations officials.

Accounts of the attacks from displaced people, most of them living in makeshift camps around Kou Kou, are strikingly similar to the accounts given by non-Arab Darfurian refugees of attacks on their villages by Darfur Arabs.

Yusuf Adif, a 29-year-old farmer from Djedidah, said he heard gunshots while tending his crops in early October. Mr. Adif was ready with a group of other village men to fight off the attackers.

Grabbing their traditional weapons — spears with hand-forged blades, bows with poison-tipped arrows — the men ran toward the gunfire. But they soon fled when they saw dozens of men on horseback with automatic rifles. Some wore white robes, like almost all Muslim men here do, while others wore khaki uniforms of a militia he could not identify, Mr. Adif said.

Abdel Karim Gamer, the sheik of Djimese, a nearby village, said that 20 people had been killed in the attack, among them women and children. Five women were abducted, he said, and he feared they had been raped, as so many women in Darfur have been.

“These are Arabs we know,” he said as he sat on a mat near the cobbled-together shelter where he and his family have been living for the past two weeks. “We trade with each other, depend on each other. We never had any problem in the past.”

Racial and ethnic identity are complex concepts in this region. The terms Arab and African or black are often used to signify the deep tribal divisions that have marked the conflict in Darfur.

Historically the racial divisions had been largely meaningless in the arid scrublands of Darfur and eastern Chad, but racial ideology, stirred up among landless nomadic Arabs in Darfur against non-Arab farmers in the 1980s, laid the groundwork for the present grim conflict over land, resources and identity in Darfur.

The ethnic makeup of eastern Chad is similar to that of Darfur. The border between Chad and Sudan has little practical meaning for the villagers who live, trade and marry across the border, and whose families and tribes often span both Chad and Darfur.

The latest violence here raises fears that Darfur’s troubles could ignite a broader conflict between nomadic Arab tribes and mostly settled non-Arab tribes across this broad swath of the sub-Saharan region.

If the racial and ethnic conflict that has infected Darfur is being copied by Chad’s Arabs, then the violence spreading beyond Darfur’s borders could presage even further regional conflict, said David Buchbinder, a researcher for Human Rights Watch who specializes in Chad.

“The racial ideology is spreading, and that is very dangerous,” Mr. Buchbinder said.

Zachariah Ismael, who fled Ambash, one of the villages that was attacked, with his wife and six children, said of the conflict across the border, “Now it has come for us, too.”

He was building a bigger, sturdier shelter to replace the one he had constructed when they arrived two weeks earlier. His crop of maize and dura wheat would soon need to be harvested, but he despaired of being able to reach his fields, half a day’s walk away.

“I think we will be here for a long time,” he said. “We cannot go home.”

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